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SUBJECT: NINEWA: PRT SUPPORTS FARMERS' ASSOCIATION IN
MULTI-SECTARIAN BARTALLAH

REF: BAGHDAD 2782

¶1. This is a Ninewa Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) message.

¶2. (SBU) Begin Summary: Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) Ninewa is supporting the formation of grassroots farmers' organizations in the religiously and ethnically diverse towns of Bartallah & Al Qosh in northeastern Ninewa Province.

Acting as the nascent institutions' organizational lynchpin, the PRT is helping to establish the managerial, financial and legal groundwork for farmers in these towns to address common agri-business problems of input procurement, land use, marketing and product processing. Based on input from these communities that commercial incentives provide a neutral zone of daily interaction and mutual cooperation that can override sectarian rivalry, the PRT has already facilitated meetings among farmers from both towns who are interested in working together. PRT is looking broadly at the potential for farmers' associations in other parts of the province as well.

End Summary.

FARMERS TAKE A FIRST STEP

¶3. (SBU) Bartallah farmers from both the Muslim Shabak and Assyrian Christian communities met with the PRT on August 15 to explore the managerial issues of creating an organization that is capable of addressing their shared needs to obtain seed, fertilizer and water, to schedule land use and to identify markets for their vegetable and cereal products. The meeting was significant in that it included both Shabak, a minority Shi'a Muslim sect, and Assyrian Christians, a minority group in Iraq as a whole. Recently, the two groups have engaged in a low-level of sometimes violent confrontation and political rhetoric over land ownership and cultural assimilation in the rich farmland east of Mosul (reftel). The two groups committed at the meeting to identifying names of farmers interested in working together on the farmers' association.

¶4. (SBU) The PRT also met in nearby Al Qosh on August 16 with a budding farmers' organization of Sunni Turkmen, Shi'a Shabak, Sunni Arabs, and Assyrian and Armenian Christians. That diverse group similarly committed itself to exploring common solutions to agri-business problems through a multi-sectarian institution. The PRT assists the nascent organizations in both towns through close coordination with key local government offices. Incoming Ninewa Director General (DG) of Agriculture Dr. Abdulsatar Asmeer Alrigbo welcomed the idea of farmers' associations, listing several ways in which one might be organized, such as a cooperative, nongovernmental organization or union.

COMBINING LOCAL AND OUTSIDE FINANCING

¶15. (SBU) The PRT is reviewing possible investment sources. Notably, the farmers themselves -- from all sects -- offered to stake some of their own funds in these institutions. While that amount would encourage local buy-in and confidence-building, the bulk of investment in the associations will likely come from outside banks, including some that already work with local businessmen, as well as donor resources like USAID-funded agri-business, micro-finance and business-support programs.

IDENTIFYING AND EXPANDING MARKETS

¶16. (SBU) Beyond organizational structure and financial support, the PRT is looking into how the farmers' organizations will process and market their products to maintain sustainability and increase profits. The DG of Agriculture, an Armenian Christian and a prominent Assyrian Christian businessman each separately expressed interest in developing profitable downstream agricultural processing factories with a wide, possibly cross-sectarian, ownership. While the PRT is searching for the best financial instrument for the potential multimillion dollar fruit and vegetable processing plant these individuals are considering, the Iraqi Middle Market Development Initiative, funded by the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, appears the most promising candidate.

COMMENT: AN ECONOMIC SOLUTION

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¶17. (SBU) The willingness of grassroots farmers from across the ethnic and religious spectrum to identify shared commercial interests and explore common solutions through civil society institutions offers promise for long-term reconciliation in Bartallah and Al Qosh. Nonetheless, tensions and distrust between members and political leaders of the many sects involved are real and could threaten to derail any cross-sectarian project (reftel). Further, the success of the farmers' organizations will depend on continued Ministry of Agriculture support as well as the identification of financing sources and profitable downstream markets, issues that the PRT is now working to resolve. End Comment.

CROCKER